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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000809

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR EUR/CACEN, DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PREL PGOV GG AM

SUBJECT: DESPITE "HOT SPRING IN ARMENIA," REVOLUTION

UNLIKELY TO BLOOM

REF A) Yerevan 757, B) Yerevan 769

¶11. (U) Sensitive But Unclassified. Please treat accordingly.

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SUMMARY  
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¶12. (SBU) Plans by opposition leaders for a "hot political spring" appeared to gain momentum in late March as politicians from both sides raised the level of rhetoric and hundreds of supporters gathered for the first set of protest rallies in Armenia's two largest cities. National Unity Party founder Artashes Geghamian's announced March 24 that he would join Stepan Demirchian and the opposition Justice Bloc in its efforts to oust Kocharian. This union signals the most cooperation within the opposition since large-scale protests following the 2003 presidential election. The GOAM reacted to opposition plans by reinforcing law enforcement and judicial ranks with Kocharian loyalists and issuing public statements saying that it would not permit sustained unrest or plans for extra-constitutional activities. Despite the recent surge of momentum, it remains unlikely that the opposition can create a solid platform that will garner enough support to unseat President Robert Kocharian. Lacking a charismatic leader upon whom a majority of Armenians agree, Armenia's opposition might stir up the political arena and make it uncomfortable for the GOAM, but will be hard pressed to replicate a "Rose Revolution" of their own this Spring. End summary.

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NATIONAL UNITY AND JUSTICE BLOC JOIN FORCES  
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¶13. (SBU) The alliance of the two largest, and former rival, opposition blocs foreshadowed what we expect will be large rallies in early April. Artashes Geghamanian, leader of the National Unity Party, announced March 24 that he would join the Justice Bloc for anti-government protests. Geghamian and Justice Bloc leader Stepan Demirchian announced that their "Hot Spring" campaign would officially begin with a rally in Yerevan April 5, during which they would announce future plans and rallies leading to "the abolishment of the illegal regime" and "the restoration of constitutional order in Armenia." Geghamian had joined forces with Demirchian for protests following the 2003 election, but the two opposition faction leaders had seemed increasingly at odds as the year progressed.

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MODEST TURNOUT FOR A1+  
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¶14. (SBU) In a prelude to "Hot Spring" activities, several anti-government rallies were held in Yerevan and Armenia's second largest city, Gyumri, during the past two weeks. A scuffle broke out between police and protesters at an opposition rally in Gyumri March 28 (ref A). Roughly 300 supporters of embattled independent television station A1+ marked the second anniversary of the station's closing by rallying in Yerevan April 2. The Yerevan City Police permitted the rally and accompanying march through Yerevan streets to proceed without incident, despite earlier GOAM declarations that it was an "illegal gathering." (Note: Rally organizers had failed to secure the necessary permit for the gathering. End Note.)

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USING THE GEORGIAN MODEL  
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¶15. (SBU) Both the government and opposition have hinted during press interviews and meetings with us that they are "drawing lessons" from Georgia's recent "Rose Revolution" to guide their activities. Demirchian and

Geghamian view Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili's campaign to unseat former President Shevardnadze as a model for their own efforts. Geghamian and Demirchian portray their alliance as a reflection of opposition alliances in Georgia prior to Shevardnadze's resignation. Opposition leaders have stated in the press that the tactics of the Georgian opposition, pressuring the government by keeping their supporters on the streets in large numbers, can also be employed to topple the Kocharian regime. For their part, the Armenian authorities seem intent to not repeat the perceived failure of the Shevardnadze regime to prevent an extended period of instability during the protests that culminated in the Georgian revolution. In the past week, President Kocharian has placed known supporters in key administrative and judicial posts (ref B), and police officials have intervened in opposition rallies in the regions (ref A).

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COMMENT  
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¶16. (SBU) Despite the recent surge of momentum, it remains unlikely that the opposition can create a solid platform that will garner enough support to unseat President Robert Kocharian. The Geghamian-Demirchian union is at best a marriage of convenience unless they can produce an alternative political platform that includes solid proposals. Lacking a charismatic leader upon whom a majority of Armenians can agree, the opposition might be able to stir up the political arena but will be hard pressed to replicate a "Rose Revolution" of their own this Spring. Nonetheless, the opposition has the capacity to initiate a series of embarrassing incidents that could well put the GOAM on the defensive, and how the GOAM chooses to respond will be critical.

ORDWAY